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# Contemporary Clay and Museum Culture

Ceramics in the expanded field

Edited by

Christie Brown

Julian Stair

Clare Twomey

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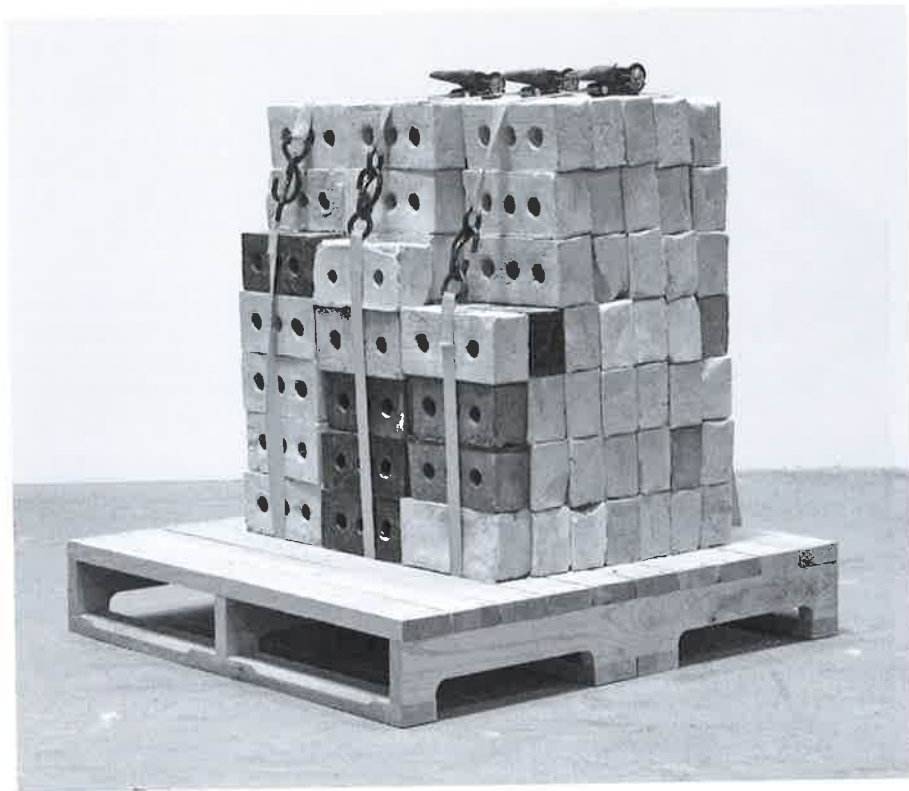


Figure 11.3 *Shrug* (image of work in progress) (2015). Wood, glazed clay, fabric, and metal. Photo by Sara Pooley. Courtesy of the artist.

company on the South Side of Chicago, to imagine that I could make the best paver in the Mid-West and people from around the world would want my paver, with clays that were mined in Illinois. I could hire 400–500 people in my neighborhood, make lots and lots of bricks that would be needed by my mayor, and my state legislator, and my president. I could go to People's Gas and I say, "Look man, I'm re-industrializing the South Side of Chicago. These brick prices are the reason why no industry is here now. The gas prices are the reason that there are no brick industries here, can't y'all help a brother out?" Which means that in addition to knowing how to make a brick, which I don't know how to do it yet, I need your help. I would also have to learn a little bit about lobbying for energy policy, to know enough about these adjacent fields so I can effectively participate.

And so there's no need to expand.

## 12 *Crimson jug from clay to the grave* (and beyond)

Exploring the ceramic object as a  
gathering point

*Christopher McHugh*

### Prologue

A waterlogged cardboard box washes up on the muddy banks of the Huangpu River in Shanghai. The fisherman, currently employed by the authorities to recover pig carcasses, thousands of which have already floated downstream due to unscrupulous farming practices (Davison, 2013), reaches out towards the box, tearing through the sodden cardboard with his boat hook. Polystyrene packaging beads spill out, virgin white against the grimy shore. Seeking a change from decomposing porcine finds, he sits down and starts to examine the contents of the box. Inside are several items carefully packed in bubble wrap and tissue paper. The largest piece turns out to be a porcelain jug. It is glazed and covered in printed imagery and text. The box also contains a ceramic paintbrush, a number of small porcelain boots and a collection of porcelain tags threaded with twine. Intrigued, the fisherman finishes his shift and takes the flotsam back to his wife, who is waiting nearby in their one-storey breeze-block house. The jug is displayed on a shelf in the kitchen where it gradually fills with cooking utensils. The brush breaks in two after being played with by his grandchildren and the pieces are cast back into the river where they descend into the silt. The labels, made from thin slabs of porcelain paper clay, are gradually broken and discarded. Sturdier, the boots survive longer as toys, before eventually being tidied away into a shoebox and forgotten. The jug remains, now minus the handle which was never intended for serious use. The fisherman occasionally looks at the photographs on the jug of foreign men from long ago, their eyes staring back at him through a veil of cooking oil and soot. He wonders who they were and why they floated to him one day while he cleared dead pigs from the river.

### Introduction

This is an imagined account of what might have happened to my artworks, *Crimson Jug* (2012) and associated pieces, after they were lost at an art fair in Shanghai in March 2013. Have they already entered the archaeological record, perhaps on a landfill site somewhere in Shanghai, or will they be found and kept for posterity by a loving owner? Enquiries have been to no avail and, as the fate of these items remains unknown, a story must suffice.

In relation to museum collections, archaeologist Chris Gosden (2004a, p. 35) differentiates between 'things' and 'objects', arguing that the former become the latter when they are separated from the 'general flow of life', depriving them of their position in relation to associated things and people. In this chapter, I want to trace the 'life history' of the jug from its beginning as porcelain clay to its last known whereabouts. Although it has been removed from currency, in discussing the jug's pre-loss career, I will show how it became animated and activated through a process of making, display and engagement with the community. While monuments are often problematised as 'crystallised' sites of forgetting (Nora, 1989; Connerton, 2009), it is argued here that, like the jug, ceramic objects have the potential



to form dynamic loci of social creativity and remembrance. This incident is worthy of discussion as it demonstrates how such objects, invested with the toil of human endeavour and possessing the potential to affect (Dudley, 2010) and evoke (Turtle, 2007), can become catalysts in the mediation of complex human-object relationships.

Cornelius Holtorf (2002) traced the 'life history' of a potsherd from excavation to subsequent classification and accession into a museum. Through this 'ethnographic approach', he sought to understand how artefacts become recognised as ancient by archaeologists and thus how archaeological meaning is created in the present. Countering normative approaches, Holtorf (2002, p. 51) construes an object's entrance into the archaeological record as a new episode of 'life' rather than the beginning of a process of 'decay'. Taking inspiration from this, I aim to provide a biography of the jug which, although told in the present, will 'extend both into the past and future' (Holtorf, 2002, p. 55). By discussing how *Crinson Jug* came into being in the first place and outlining its pre-disappearance life, what Holtorf (2002, p. 50) describes as a 'short' life history is provided. By treating its post-loss episode as a second life rather than a 'death', I add to the 'long' life history of the object. In doing so, I hope to show that the jug remains as more than just an imagined story.

### The beginning

A brief consideration of the provenance of the raw materials used in making the jug shows how they are already 'entangled' (Hodder, 2012) in human-object relationships before they are formed into an object. The jug was slip-cast from Special Porcelain P20 manufactured by Valentine Clays of Stoke-on-Trent. The raw materials include china clay, probably sourced from south-western England, as well as smaller quantities of feldspar, silica and bentonite obtained from various unspecified sources. The porcelain is purchased in bulk by Sedgefield Pottery Supplies, before being sold to the University of Sunderland. Other materials, including stains, oxides and glazes, come from a range of disparate suppliers and locations. The jug was made from a plaster mould taken from an original item sourced during a visit to Stoke-on-Trent for the British Ceramics Biennial 2011. The ring of porcelain boots upon which it rests were cast from boots taken from my own Action Man toy, which I have owned since the 1980s. Here, a personal heritage site is mixed with wider historic references.

### Kith and Kin

The decision to make the jug was also the result of a complex process of person-object dynamics. Its genesis can be traced back to my participation in *Kith and Kin: New glass and ceramics*, a group exhibition held at the National Glass Centre, University of Sunderland, between November 2011 and February 2012. My doctoral research concerned the Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens' (SMWG) collection of largely nineteenth-century transfer-printed Sunderland lustreware pottery. Reflecting this, my installation presented paper ephemera from the Scott's Pottery Archive (1788–1896), which I had accessioned as part of my research, alongside pieces of original Sunderland pottery and some of my own ceramic work. This material 'dialogue' aimed to show how Sunderland pottery production had been an intergenerational activity; families of potters had produced objects which were used commemoratively or functionally by other families. I made a series of porcelain jugs and flasks blending historical surface decoration adapted from items of Scott's pottery in the collection with contemporary imagery derived from a focus group I had done with local soldiers from Third Battalion, The Rifles (3 RIFLES). Referencing commemorative precedents in the collection, I aimed to address how the soldiers had remembered fallen comrades or coped with being separated from their families while on tour.

A changeover halfway through *Kith and Kin* provided the opportunity to create and display further work. For the second stage, I decided to make another jug in response to an enquiry made by Howard Forster, a

visitor to the first part of the exhibition. Based in Sunderland, Howard had traced his family tree back to his great-great-great-grandfather, William Crinson (1775–1836), who was indentured as an apprentice potter at Scott's Southwick Pottery in 1788. Several other members of the Crinson family were also potters and his research, compiled from online genealogy resources over the course of fifteen years, corresponded with the items of paper ephemera I had accessioned and displayed from the Scott's Pottery Archive.

For example, William Crinson is mentioned as the father of Robert Crinson (born 1804) in a declaration of non-receipt of parochial assistance.<sup>1</sup> Mark Crinson (1841–1912), manager of Rickaby's Pottery, named on an indenture,<sup>2</sup> was Howard's great-grandfather's brother. His great-uncle, another Robert Crinson (born 1876), wrote a letter to Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens in 1969, aged ninety-three, claiming to be the last of a family of 'great throwers' and the only surviving bound apprentice potter in the British Isles. Robert's brothers, William Stanley Crinson (1888–1953) and John Henry Crinson (1892–1916), served in the Durham Light Infantry (DLI) during the First World War. John Henry was killed in action on 14 September 1916 during the Battle of the Somme. Some of this information was used to make the digital decals which decorate the jug. In displays, juxtaposition of the jug with another work, *Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush* (2012), underlined the historical link between the DLI and 3 RIFLES, their contemporary descendants. This ceramic reinterpretation of the original brush used by a soldier to excavate improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan was also lost in Shanghai.

*Crinson Jug*, then, was an attempt to materialise Howard's research as a mnemonic object which celebrated his connection to the Crinson family of potters, while also referencing my work on the archive and with the community (Figure 12.1). The jug gathered together a range of potentially ephemeral information that he had accumulated, often in the form of digital downloads from family history resources, and translated it into surface imagery fired onto the porcelain jug in order to make what I intended to be an enduring, or at least 'semi-durable' (Pennell 2010, pp. 36–40), form of 'external symbolic storage' (Renfrew 2003, p. 188).

### Milburn Jug

My account of the creation of *Crinson Jug* on Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums' (TWAM) blog resulted in a series of local and international internet enquiries from several other descendants of the Crinson family (McHugh, 2012a). One sustained correspondence came from Sally Hyde, a British-born, New Zealand-based occupational therapist and amateur potter. Her great-great-great-great-grandfather, William Milburn (1771–1849), had also been a master potter at Scott's Southwick Pottery and a contemporary of William and Robert Crinson. This led to the production of a further jug based upon her connection to this ancestor (Hyde, 2012; McHugh, 2012b; Figure 12.2).

The two jugs were displayed alongside relevant archival materials as part of *What's Your Story? Discovering family history*, a genealogy exhibition held at SMWG during the summer of 2012. The exhibition was attended by Ms Hyde's parents as well as Anne Holmes, the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of William Crinson, who had also responded to the blog. This process can be described as a 'cascade of engagement' (McHugh, 2013, p. 84), in which my initial creative response to the collection resulted in the enquiry from Howard Forster. Making *Crinson Jug* prompted further engagement, where Sally Hyde and I negotiated the creation of *Milburn Jug* (2012) online using her Ancestry.com account. This, in turn, led to further engagement through the online presence of the blog.

### The jug as a gathering point

Archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012, p. 8) discusses Martin Heidegger's influential exploration of a jug as both a material entity and a 'gathering' point. Much like the potsherd discussed by Holtorf (2002), the jug's status as an object to be studied comes from its materiality; it is made from clay which 'has been



Figure 12.1 Christopher McHugh, *Crimson Jug*, 2012, porcelain, stains, pink lustre, decals, mixed media, 19 × 17 × 14 cm; displayed alongside *Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush*, 2012 (bottom right), as part of *What's Your Story? Discovering family history* at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens. Courtesy of Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens and Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums. Photograph © Colin Davison, 2012.

brought to a stand' (Heidegger, 1971, p. 167) through firing. Its 'thingness', however, emerges not from its materiality, but from its potential to link humans to their cultural and environmental context as a "thingly" meeting of absence and presence' (Adamson, 2010, p. 404). As Hodder explains:

The jug takes what is poured into it, and then pours the liquid out. The water and wine come from a rock spring or from rain or from the grape growing in the earth. The pouring out can quench thirst for humans or be a libation to the gods. So the jug connects humans, gods, earth and the sky. (Hodder, 2012, p. 8)

Borrowing the Old High German definition of a thing, or *dinc*, as a gathering to discuss a 'contested matter', Heidegger (1971, pp. 168–174) argues that the jug's essence – its 'jug-character' – comes from its ability to take, keep and, ultimately, pour out its contents in the form of a 'gift' (p. 172). Here, the jug's functionality makes it a thing: 'The jug is a thing as a vessel – it can hold something' (p. 168). The jug's ability to hold and pour comes from its formal properties – its sides and base – which form an empty space:

The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel. ... But if the holding is done by the jug's void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No – he shapes the void. ... The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.

(Heidegger, 1971, p. 169)



Figure 12.2 Christopher McHugh, *Milburn Jug*, 2012, porcelain, stains, pink lustre, decals, mixed media, 19 × 17 × 14 cm; displayed at *What's Your Story? Discovering family history* at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens. Courtesy of Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens and Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums. Photograph © Colin Davison, 2012.

According to Heidegger's definition, then, can *Crimson Jug* and *Milburn Jug* be described as true jugs in the 'thingly' (Heidegger 1971, p. 167) sense? After all, although they are watertight and can pour, their primary function is to act as vehicles for the surface display of contextual information and, consequently, much more effort has been expended on their outsides than on their internal voids. Does this mean that they are mere representations of jugs?

Indeed, in some cases, the Crinson and Milburn descendants who responded to the creation of the jugs, never experienced them at first hand. Rather, they reacted to textual descriptions and digital images of them posted online. Although this suggests that the digital presence of the jugs, and the subsequent narratives which emerged, are as important as the clay objects themselves, it was the materiality of the real objects which initially triggered this process of engagement. Howard Forster's response to the first *Kith and Kin* display of objects and archival materials led to the creation of *Crimson Jug*. Although Sally Hyde read about this online, it was my offer to make *Milburn Jug* which acted as a catalyst for her to write a story about her family connection to Sunderland pottery. Similarly, Anne Holmes' (2012) potted history of her connection to the Crinson family written for the *What's Your Story* website was only done after visiting the exhibition.

Furthermore, both Anne's and Sally's connection to their ancestors was articulated through an engagement with ceramics as much as by a common interest in genealogy. Sally is an amateur potter who feels a sense of lineage back to her forebear William Milburn. As she noted,

The knowledge of a Master Potter in my ancestry was great news to me ... I have discovered a keen interest in pottery. My work is of a very amateur level, but I like to think that William guides me, and that my DNA assists, too.

(Hyde, 2012)



Sally made her own jug in tandem with the one I made, including her favourite verses taken from some items of Scott's pottery. Anne and Sally collect Sunderland pottery and expressed a desire to locate items that might have been made by their ancestors. As Anne (Holmes, 2012) commented, 'The discoveries made on my family history journey have made me very proud of my north-eastern roots. They have also inspired me to collect Sunderland pottery and I now have a small collection including some pieces from Scott's.'

The digital trace of *Crinson Jug* on the TWAM blog has continued to generate queries after it was lost at the exhibition in Shanghai. This suggests that its real significance can be construed as residing not wholly in its materiality, but rather in the relationships it has helped to build between people and things across time and space. In this way, it matters little whether or not this is a true jug in the Heideggerian sense; its 'void' has been metaphorically filled through person-object interaction and its 'outpouring' (Heidegger 1971, p. 170) – its 'gift' – has been the stimulation and convergence of dialogues, human and material. Although Gosden (2004a, p. 36) argues that '[d]isplay is partly about making things into objects', in this case, exhibiting these jugs has had the opposite effect, turning them from ceramic 'objects' removed from the 'flow of life' into 'things' involved in a network of social relationships.

### The jug as a 'distributed' memory trace

As Glen R. Brown (2012) has noted, 'The natural life of a functional ceramic vessel, like that of something literally alive, is fraught with risk.' This might equally be said of a widely exhibited artwork. According to TNT online tracking, the parcel containing the jug and associated items arrived safely in Shanghai on 21 March 2013. This digital trace of the delivery of the jug stands as its last known whereabouts, through which can be felt the presence of its absence.

At this time, I was taking part in an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) international placement at the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, where I was researching the George Brown Collection of Oceanic objects as part of my doctorate (McHugh, 2015). Studying this ethnographic collection has led to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between material endurance and memory, helping me to reconcile *Crinson Jug*'s disappearance. A museum collection can be regarded as an index of loss (Adams, 2014) and this is certainly true of the George Brown material. Objects initially displaced from their Pacific origins in the nineteenth century by the missionary Brown were later wrested from their adoptive home of Newcastle upon Tyne when most of the collection was sold to the Japanese institution in 1986. Interestingly, the items of the collection which have been retained in the UK are mainly the New Ireland *malanggan* funerary carvings, objects which were intended by their makers to be destroyed after use.

In *malanggan* rituals, the wooden carvings become 'gradually imbued' (Gell, 1998, p. 224) with the agency of the deceased through a process of carving and firing, and can be seen as both the initiators and the outcomes of complex social relations. Once abandoned or destroyed, a 'memory trace', or 'internal skin' (Gell, 1998, p. 228) is retained in the minds of those involved in the ritual, providing an enduring 'image-based resource' (Küchler, 2002, pp. 190–191) which mediates social relationships into the future. *Crinson Jug* is comparable in that it both catalysed and recorded social interaction. It became charged with agency and meaning through decoration and firing, and was invested with provenance through display. Also, while its current fate is unknown, the connections established by making it continue as dynamic human relationships mediated through material, verbal and digital narratives. Although its 'death' was unintended, and its function incomparable to the *malanggan* carvings, memory traces of it persist in the minds of those involved, as well as in the digital presence of the blogs and associated enquires. That this piece led to *Milburn Jug* suggests that, like the *malanggan* carvings, it was not a dead end, but formed a 'locus of social creativity' (Chua and Elliott, 2013, p. 8), leading to further production.

The jugs, as artworks made with a specific commemorative and mnemonic function in mind, can perhaps also be described as the 'congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form' (Gell, 1998, p. 68), although their ability to act as an index of agency depends very much on who experiences them. The material they are made from, their maker, commissioners and potential viewers, are all linked through complex dynamics. Like Holtorf's (2002, p. 62) sherd, whose excavation, identification and eventual accession into a museum store exercised a considerable degree of human endeavour, *Crinson Jug* undertook an extraordinary journey where raw clay was turned into an art-object. This, in turn, became a widely exhibited social thing around which has developed a 'nexus' of social relations' (Chua and Elliott 2013, p. 21). In his consideration of our interdependency with things, Ian Hodder (2012, p. 24) notes that, 'Things become possessed by us, but we also have become possessed by them, by their colour, beauty, memories, associations, etc'. My sense of connection to *Crinson Jug* came from the labour I had invested to create and display it on several occasions, as well as from the various human connections it had made. That it had come about through collaboration with a member of the public also made the loss more affecting, as I felt responsible for protecting and preserving the information about his family he had painstakingly assembled over years and entrusted to me.

### Networked objects

While falling short of what Julian Bleecker (2006, p. 165) has described as a 'blogject', a 'networked object' which can directly and autonomously upload information to the internet, these ceramic jugs became activated through social media when I blogged about them (McHugh, 2012a; 2012b). Interested parties, from places ranging from Sunderland to Canada and Kuwait, who searched for information about their ancestors, were able to discover these blog entries and share their genealogical knowledge and experiences. The accounts written by Anne Holmes (2012) and Sally Hyde (2012) for the *What's Your Story: Discovering family history* website attracted further enquiries. Although not active participants like Bleecker's 'blogjects', the jugs prompted the writing of the blogs, which went on to become loci of creative remembrance. Their online presence did, therefore, play a similar role in 'knitting together, facilitating and contributing to networks of social exchange and discourse' (Bleecker, 2006, p. 165).

David Gauntlett (2011) has argued that grassroots creativity, ranging from embroidery to digital social networking, can have an empowering and transformative impact. As he notes, 'Making and sharing things online, engaging with people who (at first) you don't know anything about, anywhere in the world, can be very rewarding' (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 114). One of the blog comments (see McHugh, 2012a), where a father, Dennis Crinson, and his daughter, Kirsty, 'meet' online, demonstrates that tracing one's family tree is a creative process which often brings together like-minded communities or even members of the same family. Like Anne's and Sally's family history research, which sought to link their ancestors to tangible objects, Kirsty's investigation into the origin of her surname also shows that such genealogical delving often relies on an imaginative form of post- or prosthetic memory which might centre around a material trace. As she muses, 'I'm sure the family name is tied to some sort of landmark, perhaps a megalith, but Google has only so many answers' (McHugh, 2012a).

### Conclusion – life after death

*Crinson Jug* does not just exist as a digital trace or an imagined narrative. A necessarily imperfect replica of it was made for an exhibition at SMWG in June 2013. As Heidegger's jug shows, objects become things when they are socially constituted as such. This is well illustrated by archaeologist Jody Joy's (2002)



Figure 12.3 Christopher McHugh, *Crimson Jug Mark II*, 2013, porcelain, stains, pink lustre, decals, mixed media, 19 × 17 × 14 cm. John Henry Crinson (centre) was killed at the Battle of the Somme on 14 September 1916. His brother, William Stanley Crinson, partially visible on the left, was injured in the same battle. He is shown on the label on the right recuperating at the Mayfield Auxiliary Hospital. Courtesy and copyright the author. Photograph by Jo Howell, 2014.

biography of his grandfather's war medal. The medal only became a 'thing' when a replica of it was ordered to replace the lost original. Presenting this copy to his grandfather strengthened familial bonds in a way that the original, which had been kept in its box and neglected, did not. After the death of his grandfather, the medal took on new significance as a focal point of commemoration. As Joy (2002, p. 142) explains, 'Things can communicate certain aspects of the personalities of dead ancestors and they can act to create and maintain social relationships. Things play an active role within our society, just like human beings.'

Discussing Eduardo Paolozzi's use of known 'fakes' of African sculpture in the exhibition, *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, ethnographer and curator Malcolm McLeod invokes non-Western conceptions of authenticity. In some cases,

An item, made specifically to replace an earlier work which has become damaged or lost, may be regarded as essentially the same as the earlier version. What we would regard as a copy may even be esteemed more highly than the original.

(McLeod, 1985, p. 46)

That *Crimson Jug Mark II* (2013) is a replica is less important than the potential it carries forward. It inherits the biography of the original but also has the possibility of a second 'life' where it may go on to encourage more person-object interaction through further display as part of the SMWG's contemporary collection.

Returning to the sherd analogy, a preoccupation with archaeology was a recurrent theme of the 'Ceramics in the Expanded Field' conference held at the University of Westminster in July 2014. Christie Brown's (2014) 'expanded field' of interests included antiquity, and her work *Sleepover* (2012) was inspired by Freud's metaphorical description of psychoanalysis as excavation. Julian Stair's (2014) funerary ware explores the relationship between pottery and the body, the addition of the deceased's ash to the clay body physically and metaphorically incavating (Holtorf, 2004; Pollard, 2004, p. 50) and inhuming. In his keynote address, Theaster Gates (2014), showing a series of old archaeological slides and diagrams of pottery, raised the question, 'Who will draw our pots in the future?', seemingly inviting the conference delegates to think about their contribution as ceramic artists and curators to posterity. It is hoped that this account of *Crimson Jug* demonstrates that the output of ceramic artists, especially those using fired clay, has the potential to reflect the present as well as add to the future archaeological record. Ultimately, as archaeologist Laurent Olivier (2001, p. 187) highlights, by making new things we are augmenting this palimpsest as 'all manifestations that bear witness, physically, to human activity are, by their nature, concerned with archaeology'. Although museum objects tend to come from the past and are intended to endure into the future, we encounter them in the present. The challenge of an artistic reinterpretation might be to reinstate these objects from the past, making them 'things' of today by addressing their unique 'material trajectories' (Olsen, 2010, p. 126) and harnessing their potential to act as gathering points of person-object interaction.

## Notes

- 1 Scott Archive. Declaration showing non-receipt of parochial assistance, 1852 (copy of letter). TWCMS: 2011.1044. Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens.
- 2 Scott Archive. Indenture of apprenticeship for Mark Crinson, 1859. TWCMS 2011.2387. Sunderland Museum & Winter Garden.

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